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Study Abroad: Factors Lending to the Decision

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STUDY ABROAD: FACTORS LENDING TO THE DECISION

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is an educational travel experience in which students participate by continuing their collegiate studies in an alternate country than their own and learning intercultural skills (Kitsantas, 2004). The world is growing more connected, and with it, a growing need for intercultural competence. In a study done by Eyre, top business executive ranked intercultural sensitivity of equal importance to strategic planning, specialist knowledge, and persistence (2011). Over the past decade, there has been a calling to increase the number of United States' students participating in study abroad programs in order to keep up with the demand for global skills (Lincoln Commission, 2005).

This study focuses on the trends of students planning to study abroad and who have already studied abroad with the hopes of being able to understand the influencing factors and increase participation in such programs. Factors researched vary from gender, to parental influence, to finances, to involvement in collegiate activities to name a few. For the purpose of this study, the researcher defined participating in a study abroad program as a semester long experience. Though there are other program durations in which students can partake, one semester was the focus of this study. Through two separate surveys, the researcher uncovered some elements that lead to students actively pursuing a study abroad experience as well as answered what factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs? What influence does the study abroad office exert over a student's decision to study abroad? And what

conceptions or circumstances do students have prior to college that stimulate them to decide one way or another? Thus, this study hopes to address the problem that the US has a slower study abroad growth than many other countries, by discovering what students' motivation is to study abroad so that a greater number of students can be persuaded to participate in such programs in the future. (Bidwell, 2014).

LITERATURE REVIEW

With increased innovation and a more global society forming, the growing trends of studying abroad is prevalent. Study Abroad is defined as any educational program located outside of the student's home country (Kitsantas, 2004). However, according to a report from U.S. News, the number of students in which the United States of America is sending abroad is growing at only a 2% rate compared to an increase of 8% in the numbers of foreign students coming to America for study (Bidwell, 2014). President George W. Bush was an advocate for educational opportunities and supporting American students' effort to study abroad. The Lincoln Commission (2005) was a bold idea to "send one million students to study abroad annually in a decade" (p.5). The Lincoln Commission presented the belief that American undergraduates should interact with the world around them, so as to ensure a future for the nation (Lincoln Commission, 2005). Though the bill died in committee, it invoked a lot of discussion and, spiked the interest of many researchers who have since conducted their own studies related to intercultural communication and international educational experiences.

Research pertaining to study abroad has ranged from the effects on language fluency, to intercultural competence, media usage, culture shock, to predictors of study

abroad intent. The community is widely in agreement on the findings from these studies but concur that many experiments can or should be repeated with a larger sample size or better means of measurement for validity. A couple discrepancies present themselves in research results pertaining to which majors or specific activities correlate to increased participation in an overseas program. Studies endorse the importance study abroad programs have in increasing intercultural skills, which is rapidly becoming more important in a more global world (Kitsantas, 2004). Also notable is the ever growing gap between the current year and the year in which many of these studies were carried out (e.g. Kitsantas, 2004; Trooboff, Cressey & Monty, 2004; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). The studies' results may be getting outdated. Because of the importance, further studies may help reveal patterns for successful abroad experiences, and help more students partake in an education outside of the United States' boundaries. Students go off to university coming from all walks of life, this study seeks to understand what factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs? What influence does the study abroad office exert over a student's decision to study abroad? And what conceptions or circumstances do students have prior to college that stimulate them to decide one way or another?

Influences on Studying Abroad

Study Abroad, for one reason or another, has reoccurring demographics in the student population that participates in the programs. Previous studies have declared that women are more likely to study abroad than men with total participant numbers being two-thirds female (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015). The reason for this being that most woman are less "ethnocentric, more open-minded, and less intercultural

communication apprehensive” which are traits that help them adapt to a new culture better (Vernon, Moos, & Loncarich, 2017, p.1). Sadly, data reveals that only 1.6% of enrolled college students in the United States studied abroad in 2005 (Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2009). This is a small slice of the population, and an even smaller amount are racially diverse. According to Luo & Jamieson-Drake (2015), “minority students, male students, nontraditional aged students, community college students, and students with disabilities were less likely to participate in a study abroad program” (p.33). Many universities are hoping to increase their numbers through the addition of study abroad offices and better advertisement. In a study done by Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2016), a little over 50% of responses from business students reported they either “did not know” if their university had study abroad options, or their university “did not” have programs for study abroad, when in fact they did offer them.

However, influence can also be attributed to upbringing, more specifically, if parents earned a college degree, then their child is more likely to pursue an education abroad (Salisbury, et al., 2009). Safety concerns were also taken into account for one-third of the students deciding to study abroad, and more than two-thirds believed their parents would be concerned about their safety (Vernon, Moos, & Loncarich, 2017). Additionally, financial burdens influence students’ decision in partaking in study abroad programs. Lower income students, or those receiving federal financial aid were found to be 11% less likely to be involved with study abroad (Salisbury, et al., 2009). Though there are many scholarships and means of assistance for students in this situation, their expectations were inhibited as well as their plans or intentions.

Curiously, results pertaining to which activities or campus organizations are most common for study abroad students to have participated in are contradictory. According to Luo & Jamieson-Drake (2015), “involvement in campus organizations and club activities may present potential conflicting interests to students” (p.51). Whereas BaileyShea and Wall (2009) found that “extracurricular involvement added considerable support of the idea that campus involvement produces positive outcomes” in study abroad participation (p.184). Luo & Jamieson-Drake (2015) concluded the “involvement in the student government, a music or theatre group, a political club, club sports, and off-campus study negatively affected participation” (p.53). A portion of this statement is in direct contrast with the results of BaileyShea and Wall’s research, which stated that three variables were significant in study abroad participation including “membership to a Greek house, participating in student government, and participating in an internship” (BaileyShea & Wall, 2009, p.162). These inconsistencies must be sorted out, as accurate information pertaining to the matter could greatly help a study abroad office increase participation in their abroad programs at their universities. This study dug further into this information in an attempt to divulge and validate if a pattern persists.

Success of the Experience

Also determining factors in the study abroad decision are the expectations of learning outcomes or memorable moments from the experience. Internationalization has become a universal goal, especially shared amongst American universities. Parsons (2010) affirmed that students partaking in educational opportunities overseas have demonstrated “greater foreign language skills; more knowledge of specific regions and countries; attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors that were more internationally aware,

open, curious, and cooperative; and greater cross cultural skills” (p.328). These skills are sought after by many companies around the world, including the United States. In a CNN article by Imam (2014), many study abroad alumni attest to learning more about themselves, finding confidence, and challenging their mindsets about other cultures. The article highlights that Michelle Obama is an advocate for study abroad; as the skills learned overseas translate back to sought after skills in United States’ businesses (Imam, 2014). Research has found that outcomes from international student programs are extremely beneficial as they “enhance students’ cross-cultural skills and global understanding” (Kitsantas, 2004, p.447). With the overwhelmingly positive outcomes from study abroad programs that increase job opportunities for students, it is necessary to examine influencing factors for why students decide to participate, or not participate in a study abroad program.

To conclude, the importance of study abroad programs is relevant as law makers, university board members, and past participants of such programs can attest. However, only a small percentage of the United States population is utilizing study abroad programs to further their education. The benefits of study abroad can be found in greater global perspective upon return evidenced by increased interest in foreign language, desire to travel, and more self-confidence (Kitsantas, 2004). Legislation in the form of the Lincoln Commission (2005) has attempted to increase the numbers of Americans going overseas to travel each year. Still, there are barriers keeping students from participating including financial burdens and safety concerns (Vernon, Moos, & Loncarich, 2017). Patterns have come forward in regards to gender with nearly 66% of study abroad students being women (Salisbury, et al., 2009). In order to increase the

number of study abroad students altogether, and reach all demographics of students – male, female, white, African-American, Asian, business student, nursing student, athletic, musical, etc. – then research must be replicated with a specific sample size for the university in question. As the Lincoln Commission (2005) states, America must continue in its attempt at “making study abroad the norm, not the exception” (p.5). The way to achieve this is to divulge students’ motivations for deciding one way or another. This study helped a specific, private, faith-based institution in its attempt to prepare students for thoughtful and informed living by answering what factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs?

Research Questions, Hypothesis, & Justification

In order to increase involvement in study abroad programs, which is a goal the United States of America and many universities are attempting to accomplish in accordance to the Lincoln Commission (2005), the reasoning students participate must be analyzed in order to instigate an increase in commitment to studying abroad. Conflicting answers surrounding influential factors have arisen, but it is believed that each university, whether public, private, large, or small – has its own specific trends. This study proposes the more activities students are involved with, the less likely they are to study abroad.

RQ1 What factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs?

Students’ access to information about study abroad coming from a university’s study abroad office is an element not often dissected. In research done by Bandyopadhyay and Bandyopadhyay (2016) their results recommended the college counselors or program directors should attempt to manage their students’ expectations

of their abroad experience which goes to show that study abroad offices can influence a student's choice to study outside their country. This study proposes the more study abroad offices host events advertising their programs, the greater percentage of students will study abroad.

RQ2 What influence does the study abroad office exert over a student's decision to study abroad?

Many studies have been done concerning actions and commitments college students have while in college that could alter their study abroad choice. However, Luo & Jamieson-Drake (2016) touched on students' actions in high school, specifically their time spent socializing with friends positively correlating with their desire to study abroad. This reveals that students' experiences preceding college can alter their choice on studying abroad. This study proposes that students who have traveled outside of their home country before college are more likely to have the ambition to study abroad.

RQ3 What conceptions or circumstances do students have prior to college that stimulate them to decide one way or another?

METHODS

This study operated with a nonprobability sampling and gathered quantitative and qualitative data. A qualitative lens is being used as the study is looking for explanations and rational that cannot be explained solely through quantitative data. The researcher tied in elements of Social Judgment Theory to provide insight on the results. The design of the research was cross sectional and pre-experimental. There were two populations of students to which surveys were disseminated. The first subjects, a convenience sample of undergraduate freshman at the specific private university, completed Survey

1. The second subject group consisted of undergraduate students who have fulfilled a semester long study abroad experience through the specific private university completed Survey 2. The two surveys were hosted on [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) and a coordinating link was sent to the two subject groups through their university email. The freshman email list was acquired from the Office of Institutional Research at the university while the Survey 2 email list was obtained from the university's study abroad office. The surveys, see Appendix, consisted of demographic information, questions about their interests, travel history, GPA, etc. Both surveys were self-administered and consisted of a variation of open and closed questions, with a few likert scale questions as well. Both Survey 1 and Survey 2 were emailed to the related students on October 15th. A follow up email with the respective links to [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) was sent to Survey 1 and Survey 2 subjects on October 19th. The researcher closed the survey to allow no further responses on October 25th, 2018 for Survey 1 subjects and October 23rd, 2018 for Survey 2 subjects. Survey 1 was distributed to a total of 238 freshmen while Survey 2 was dispersed to 14 students. The age range was approximately 18-22. Once the research was collected, the researcher performed a mixture of descriptive analysis and statistical analysis on both Survey 1 and 2, at times comparing the responses. The researcher conducted Chi-square tests and one- tailed T-tests while making explanatory claims through the lens of Sherif's Social Judgment Theory in the hopes of answering the research questions, mainly what factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 14 current students who have participated in a study abroad program at the university (Survey 2 subjects), 11 of them responded to the survey (a response rate of 79%). However, of the 238 freshman to whom the survey was sent out (Survey 1 subjects), only 45 responded to the survey (a response rate of 19%). A large limitation of this study was a small sample size. Despite this, there were many conclusions the researcher drew from the data collected.

The first research question asked: What factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs? had substantial data to dissect. The study proposed that if students live off campus, they are more likely to study abroad. A Chi-Square was calculated with Survey 1, resulting in a p-value of .057 ($P < .05$). The researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis. In addition to this, when looking at the results of Survey 2, around 55% of the students lived on campus before studying abroad. This shows that this is not a significant factor the study abroad office should concern themselves with when persuading students to study abroad.

This study proposed that women have a stronger interest to study abroad than men. The results of this study reject the null and accept the alternative after performing a Chi-Square test where the p-value was .004 ($p < .05$). This reaffirms previous research that was carried out by Luo & Jamieson-Drake (2015) that found overall, women were more likely to study abroad than males.

It is possible that there is a correlation with students involved in sports not showing interest in studying abroad. 73% of Survey 2 subjects were involved with sports in high school; however, 0% were involved with sports in college and ended up studying abroad. The researcher would argue that the sports schedule interferes with the time

commitment required to participate in an international education program. Though not statistically proven, 83% of the students who answered “not interested” in studying abroad were involved with Sports in college, while only 14% of those “interested” in studying abroad were involved with Sports in college. This could also provide an answer to the discrepancy that is evident between the numbers of students who are interested in an international education program from Survey 1 and those who carry through with it as shown from the university’s past. 37 of the freshman in Survey 1 expressed interest in studying abroad. This was 86% of the Survey 1 subjects. It is apparent that many students would like to participate but when comparing the numbers of those who do (14 students out of all sophomores through seniors at the university); it drops off considerably.

Social Judgment Theory, created by Muzafer Sherif, says that people weigh and evaluate a new idea by comparing it with their present point of view, also called an analysis of attitudes. Sherif argues that people see many opinions as reasonable, therefore an attitude cannot be sufficiently portrayed by a point on a continuum. Social Judgment Theory sorts a person’s attitude, in this case toward a study abroad experience, into a mixture of three zones: latitude of acceptance – where students see participation as agreeable, latitude of rejection – where students object to participation in a program, and latitude of non-commitment – where students are undecided. When applying Social Judgment Theory to this study, it is clear that the majority of students hold a study abroad experience in a positive light as responses for wanting to participate included “meet new people,” “to learn more about other cultures,” “one gains a lot of knowledge,” “getting a new perspective of the world,” and “experience new

things” to name a few. The researcher would argue that most students are already in a latitude of acceptance in the realm of viewing participating and outcomes of studying abroad in general. Other factors proposed could cause a change such as the few students who expressed concern with “financial instability” and “sports commitments and summer jobs/internships.” If sports commitments are central to a student’s college experience, then it will be more difficult to change their position, also called an anchor. Social Judgment Theory is not only about judgment, but is a social process, so the interpersonal bond between people helps to persuade. This is most successful if a message comes from a reference group – a group that members use to define their identity, often family and friends.

The researcher then hypothesized that if a student knew someone who had studied abroad, they would be more likely to study abroad. The data failed to reject the null with a p-value of .256 ($p < .05$). However, 91% of the students who participated in an international education program, the Survey 2 subjects, knew someone who had studied abroad previous to their decision to participate in an international student program. It is possible, according to Social Judgment Theory, that the encouragement from or reputation of the person they knew to have participated in an international student program was a small or moderate enough difference to the anchor position to cause full commitment. In a study carried out by Van Swol, Braun, Acosta Lewis, Carlson and Dimperio (2018), when people talk, those that have a less divergent opinion from the anchor are more influential. Also, when discussing shared information, material both parties know, the person who shares more has greater influence (Van

Swol et al., 2018). The researcher believes it is still beneficial for a study abroad office to connect interested students with past participants in international student programs.

This study proposed that students with jobs were less likely to study abroad. However, the p-value of .661 failed to reject the null ($p < .05$). This study also suggested that students who were concerned with their financial situation would be less likely to study abroad. Though the results failed to reject the null with a p-value of .256 ($p < .05$), this could be another area of discrepancy where Survey 1 subjects indicate interest, but because of a financial situation, they do not carry through with an international student program later on in college. Though, finances were not the deciding factor for 67% of the Survey 1 students who are “not interested” in studying abroad. See **Image 1** as it compares Survey 1 students who would “Yes” like to study abroad or “No” not like to study abroad with their financial inclinations. However, it appears as though the majority, 65% of students, are concerned with their finances with or without factoring in a semester abroad. As found by Whatley (2017) in a study solely dedicated to how finances influence international student programs, the financial factor may be explained in that grant funding was found to have a positive impact on participation, while loans, expected family contribution, and financial need have a negative impact. Perhaps the students not interested in studying abroad were only “somewhat” concerned with finances if they fell in the category of taking out loans or their family contributes to their education. Whatley (2017) found that students whose parents were paying for the majority of their child’s education were more likely to agree that studying abroad was too expensive. This could be an area to research further.

The second research question looked to find: What influence does the study abroad office exert over a student's decision to study abroad? Asked in Question 14 in Survey 1, 86% of the students knew the name of the study abroad office at the university, however there was no correlation of which students, whether they were interested in studying abroad or not, knew or did not know about the study abroad office. In fact, 83% of the students who are *not* interested in studying abroad were aware of the study abroad office. Nevertheless, the subjects of Survey 2 indicated that the study abroad office was helpful, "encouraging," "helped me look through programs," "secured my decision to study abroad," etc. The results of this study were endorsed by research done by Loberg (2012) that found that barriers such as financial concern or even lack of family support could be overcome with faculty support through the study abroad office. Information regarding the length of trips most students are interested in participating can be seen in **Image 2**. It appears that 1 week or 1 semester continue to be the most popular.

The final research question the researcher looked into was: What conceptions or circumstances do students have prior to college that stimulate them to decide one way or another? Most notable was the information found in question 8 of Survey 2, the level of education reached by parents. 100% of the parents of students who participated in an international student program went to college, 91% of them obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. **See Image 3**. This implication correlates with Social Judgment Theory. Parents are often student's reference group as what they say is seen as coming from a trustworthy source. The researcher argues that students with parents who value knowledge are more likely to seek an education abroad. This correlates to research

done by Workman (2015) who found that whether positive or negative, parents influence their student's career decisions. In addition to this finding, the research from Survey 2 suggests that students who have traveled outside of the country previously are more likely to study abroad. This is substantiated by the majority, 82% of students, having traveled abroad before completing a semester abroad. **See Image 4.** Finally, when looking at GPAs from Survey 2, the students had an average GPA of 3.55 ranging from 3.02 – 3.95. The researcher challenges that students who value their education are more likely to study abroad. In addition, most international student programs have a GPA admission requirement that could be a factor. In a study done by Trooboff, Cressey, and Monty (2004), the researchers looked at how international universities grade the study abroad students influences how motivated the students were to their education while abroad. Though, Trooboff, Cressey and Monty (2004) admit that “cultural learning is a key part of the rationale for studying abroad” and that grades and transcript procedures should be regarded with a perspective of broader motivation. The study did find that grades obtained abroad positively correlated with grades obtained prior to the abroad experience, going as far to state that it is not surprising that “good students are good students” (Trooboff, Cressey & Monty, 2004).

IMPLICATIONS

This study proved important in understanding the current demographics and factors that play into a student's study abroad decision. This study highlighted the importance of study abroad programs for Americans to learn intercultural skills, and confirmed women are more likely to study abroad. Study abroad offices can analyze this data to better persuade students to participate in abroad programs. This study indicated

interesting trends regarding parental influence and education, sports commitments, travel prior to college, and the influence of knowing other study abroad students.

LIMITATIONS

As previously stated, this study's results were limited by the small sample size, though this is a necessary first step in receiving initial results to then constructing a larger study. Another limitation includes a small bias with those that responded to Survey 1, as they may have been more inclined to answer a survey in their email about studying abroad if they themselves were interested in studying abroad. Also, this data only reflects the student body at the specific private university in the Midwest where the research was conducted; the results of this study cannot be generalized to a greater population but used as a pilot study from which future research can be formulated. Additionally, specific questions in Survey 1, such as GPA, may lack integrity, as freshman had not yet completed their first semester of college to obtain a GPA when the question was asked. Furthermore, both questionnaires were self-administered and may have led to untruthful or rushed responses.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides many areas for future studies to expand upon. This study could be repeated with a larger sample size or at a different university. A longitudinal study could be carried out to follow the freshman that suggested they were interested in studying abroad to see if they participate in the coming years, and if they do not, why not? A study could investigate further on the financial influence, are students less likely to study abroad if they are taking out loans or their parents are paying for their higher education? Future research could also explore in detail how does parental involvement

and parental education influence a student's decision to study abroad, or focus more on how to incentivize college athletes to participate in an international education program.

CONCLUSION

As study abroad programs are found to provide unparalleled educational experiences, more universities across the United States of America are looking to increase involvement in said programs. This study was carried out to answer the following questions: What factors influence student involvement in study abroad programs? What influence does the study abroad office exert over a student's decision to study abroad? What conceptions or circumstances do students have prior to college that stimulate them to decide one way or another? The results reaffirmed that females are more likely to study abroad than males, therefore the researcher recommends the study abroad office discover a way to encourage more men to study abroad. The study provided interesting data wherein all the students who studied abroad had a parent either attend college or graduate with at least a bachelor's degree, combining that information with the average GPA of 3.55 for the students who have studied abroad, it appears as though students who study abroad hold a greater emphasis for education. The results support that the study abroad office has a positive effect on students' decisions to study abroad. The researcher recommends the study abroad office learn where an individual student's latitude falls before presenting a case for study abroad, as well as their ego-involvement which refers to how crucial an issue is to them in their lives in order to have the greatest influence. Overall, this study corroborated past research and generated questions for future research.

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Appendix

Image 1.

How much does your financial situation affect your likeliness to study abroad?

Answered: 43 Skipped: 0

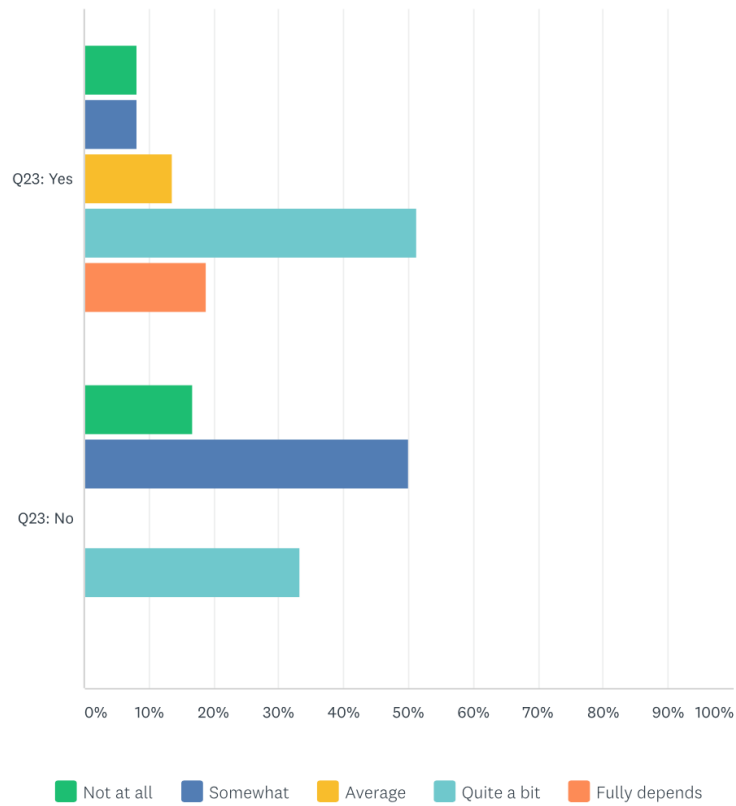


Image 2.

Answered: 45 Skipped: 0

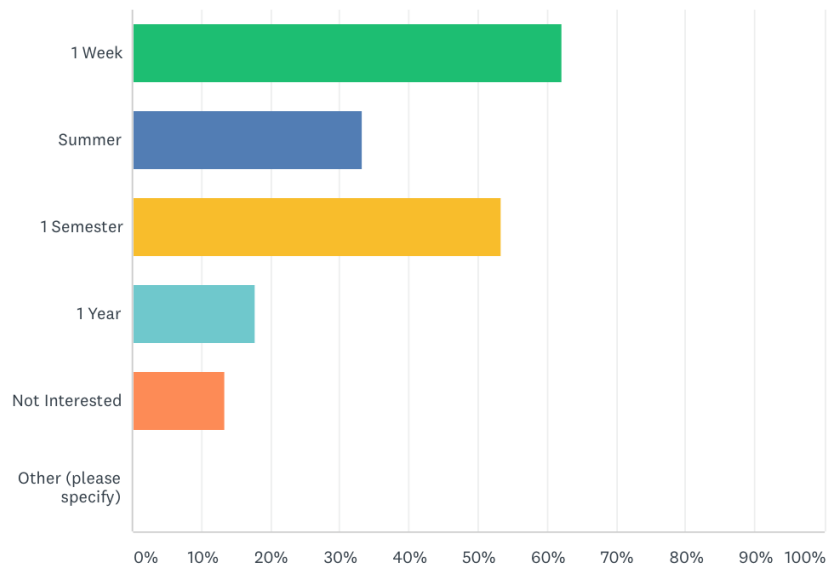


Image 3.

What level of education did your parents reach? (Indicate the higher of the two)

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0

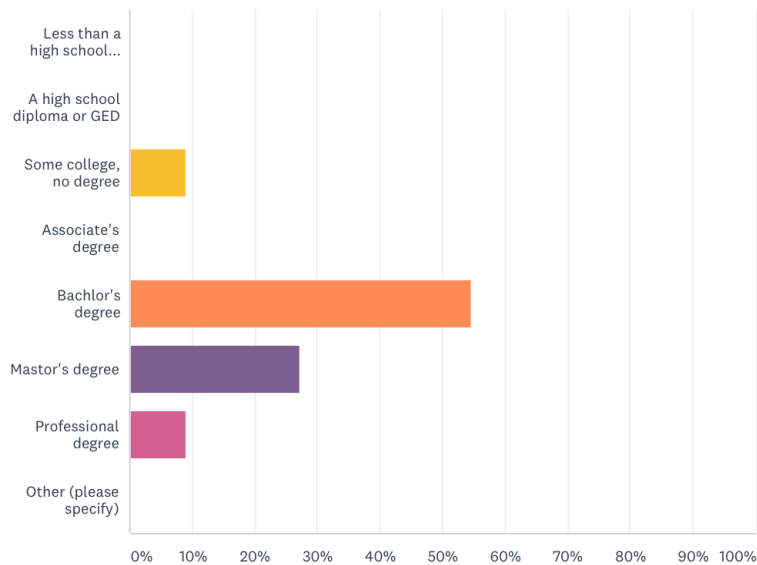


Image 4.

Had you ever traveled outside of the USA before studying abroad?

Answered: 11 Skipped: 0

